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Author(s): Louise Adams Holland

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HERODOTUS I, 94: A PHOCAEAN VERSION OF AN ETRUSCAN TALE

THE story which Herodotus tells (I, 94) about the founding of the Etruscan nation has been forced into greater prominence than its author foresaw or intended. He introduces it only as a casual anecdote to enliven the history of Lydia. It has no structural connection with the rest of the narrative and could easily have been inserted from some new source after the book was finished. It happens, however, to be the oldest and fullest version we possess of a tradition generally followed in antiquity and still given credence by many. The familiar tale relates that in the days of King Atys there was a great famine in the land of Lydia; that to distract themselves from the wretchedness of ever-increasing want the Lydians invented most of the games common to themselves and the Greeks—dice, knucklebones, and ball; that for eighteen years they made the most of their scanty store by eating one day and gambling the next; that at the end of this period they divided the population by lot into two sections, one to remain at home and the other to migrate under the guidance of the king's son, Tyrsenos; that the emigrants finally made their way to Umbria where they settled and called themselves Tyrsenoi. The story as it stands is plainly corrupt, if not entirely false; yet the ancient tradition in general accepted a Lydian origin for the Etruscans¹ and many moderns have found in an Asiatic connection the answer to perplexing questions. Ancients and moderns alike have chosen what to accept and what to reject. Athenaeus (I, 19A), though untroubled by eighteen years of famine and a mass migration of half the population, reproaches the historian for setting the invention of ball-playing so late, since Homer represents it as already common in the heroic age. A group of scholars, which includes many distinguished names, rejects the details of the anecdote but inclines to believe that it preserves one historical fact in bringing the Etruscans from Asia Minor. We can still find no better spokesman for this group than George Dennis, who stated the essentials of the case in 1883.²

Since the popular tradition of both Romans and Etruscans³ was in agreement with the Lydian theory, the one ancient dissenter is all the more conspicuous. We must give due attention to the argument which Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Antiquitates Romanae*, I, 28) brings against Herodotus and his Lydian migration. Dionysius is not an unprejudiced witness: he has the avowed intention (I, 5 and elsewhere) of demonstrating the Greek origin of Italian culture. In this case, however, his damaging bias cannot affect his statement of the fact that native Lydian tradition as represented by the logographer Xanthus makes no mention of such a famine and migration, names no prince of the land Tyrsenos, and accounts for the sons of Atys as Lydus and Torebus, who both pursued their whole careers in Asia. The point seems well taken that a Lydian-born writer and one interested in ancient history

¹ Ducati, *Etruria Antica*, chap. II; Dennis, *Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria*³, Introduction, p. xxxv; Randall-MacIver, *The Etruscans*, pp. 7-9.

² *Op. cit.*, Introduction, pp. xxxix-xlvi.

³ Tacitus, *Annales*, IV, 55; Dennis, *op. cit.*, p. xl.

would know such a story if anybody did—Ξάνθος δ' ὁ Λυδὸς ἱστορίας παλαιᾶς εἰ καὶ τις ἄλλος ἔμπειρος ὦν, τῆς δὲ πατρίου καὶ βεβαιωτῆς ἂν οὐδενὸς ὑποδέεστερος νομισθεῖς κ.τ.λ. Yet Xanthus is not only silent on the episode: he substitutes a different account of the same years and so strengthens what has been dismissed too lightly as an argument *ex silentio* on the part of Dionysius.¹

The modern tendency is to agree with Dionysius on the credibility of Xanthus rather than with Athenaeus (XII, C 3, p. 515), who discredits him altogether.² Xanthus was somewhat older than Herodotus, though approximately contemporary, and is the only known chronicler of Lydian affairs before the Alexandrian age. Though he wrote in Greek and bears a Greek name, he seems to have been a Lydian, son of a man named Kandaules, and his residence in Sardis would give him access to official, as well as to oral, traditions of the region. We may as well admit that Dionysius has scored a point and that, in spite of his direct statement to the contrary, Herodotus took the story from some non-Lydian source. That there was a source which seemed reputable to the historian we may take for granted. Even those who have called Herodotus the "father of lies," believe that he repeats with too much credulity what he has heard from others, rather than that he fabricates out of whole cloth the stories which he incorporates into his history.

Next to the Lydians the people most directly concerned in this particular anecdote are the Etruscans themselves. Could Herodotus have taken the tale direct from an Etruscan source? Apparently not. There is no indication that his extensive travels carried him into their part of Italy or that he could consult their records at first hand. Then who could have told him about the Etruscans and their strangely picturesque origin? He tells us himself (I, 163), when he says: "Now the Phocaeans were the first of the Greeks who performed long voyages and it was they who brought the notice of the Greeks to the Adriatic and Tyrrhenia, to Spain and Tartessos." "οἱ δὲ Φωκαῖες οὗτοι ναυτιλίῃσι μακρῇσι πρῶτοι Ἑλλήνων ἐχρήσαντο, καὶ τὸν τε Ἀδρίην καὶ τὴν Τυρσηνίην καὶ τὴν Ἰβηρίην καὶ τὸν Ταρτησσὸν οὗτοί εἰσι οἱ καταδέξαντες." The intimate connection between Tyrrhenians and Phocaeans throughout the history of Herodotus would suggest that all his Etruscan information came from the same adventurous travellers. Twice he mentions Tyrrhenians for the purpose of locating another people (I, 57; VI, 22). In all other cases where they are mentioned, aside from the notorious foundation legend (I, 94), they enter into the narrative only through the experiences of the Phocaeans. There are four such references:

1. I, 163, where the Phocaeans are the first to bring back tidings of Tyrrhenia and other places in the western Mediterranean.

2. I, 166, where the Phocaeans engage in a naval battle against the allied forces of the Etruscans and the Carthaginians.

3. I, 167, where the Etruscans, in obedience to the Delphic oracle, establish funeral games to be offered annually for the Phocaean captives put to death after the above battle.

¹ Randall-MacIver, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

² Schmid and Stählin, *Geschichte der Griech. Lit.*, 1929, in Mueller's *Handbuch der Klass. Altertumswissenschaft*, VII, 1, 1, pp. 704-7.

4. VI, 17, where Dionysius the Phocaeon, after he becomes a pirate, harries the Carthaginians and Etruscans, but spares the Greeks.

To understand the connection between the Phocaeans and the Etruscans we must review the history of Phocaea as we know it from the pages of Herodotus and from other ancient evidence. One fact to note in the beginning is that Herodotus gives their story a color which is favorable to them: they are always gallant and glorious, even in misfortune. Without being unduly cynical, we may infer from this that he had the story from the Phocaeans themselves. In brief, it runs as follows.¹ Rather than submit to Harpagus and become slaves of Cyrus, the brave Phocaeans deserted their city and swore a mighty oath never to return. Some of them weakened and returned to their old home, but half the population sailed west with all their goods and chattels and finally made their way to Corsica, where they had established a trading post at Alalia about twenty years before. Here they lived for five years in the active practice of their old occupations of trade and piracy, until the Carthaginians and Etruscans sent a combined fleet to sweep them from the Sardinian Sea. In the engagement which followed, the Phocaeans were victorious, but lost forty of their sixty ships and were forced to abandon their settlement with their families and their goods, to take refuge among the Greeks of southern Italy. The Etruscans took numerous captives whom they set ashore near Caere and stoned them to death. It is obvious whose version we have here of this strange victory which Ciacere rightly characterizes as a "mal celata sconfitta."² The Phocaeans, at last, like Aeneas and his host, reached *certae sedes* at Velia, where about 540 B.C. they founded a city or settled with the inhabitants of a native village already established there. The success of Velia bears witness to the energy and vitality which the Phocaeans exhibited throughout their history, as well as to their amazing power to accommodate themselves to circumstances. The place was not especially blessed, having anchorage but no good beach for boats and no very promising land for agriculture. But the Phocaeans had made the best of many a bad business and were accustomed to living by the sea and by their wits. Through trade (still including piracy) and through fishing they soon grew prosperous. The Eleatic school of philosophy and the residence in Velia of the Colophonian poet, Xenophanes, remind us that the Phocaeans did not spend all their energies in bartering merchandise or drying fish. They issued, moreover, a series of silver coins, as perfect in their kind as anything the Greeks have left us.³ The strength and persistence of the Hellenic tradition among them is shown by the use of the Greek language even under the Roman Empire,⁴ though their neighbor, Posidonium, was submerged by Oscan influence long before it became Roman.

The Phocaeon connection with Etruria began early. They were the first rivals of Phoenician traders in the western waters, and had early established an important colony at Massilia and other trading posts on the coast of Spain and the Riviera. Some very doubtful traditions connect them with actual settlements on the coast of Etruria at Pisa and Populonia.⁵ At any rate, they were probably in large part responsible for

¹ Herodotus I, 163-167.

² Ciacere, *Storia della Magna Grecia*, I, p. 301.

³ Head, *Historia Nummorum*, p. 71; Seltman, *Greek Coins*, pp. 79 ff.; Ciacere, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 295 ff., for full discussion of Velia with the ancient sources.

⁴ Ciacere, *op. cit.*, I, p. 305.

⁵ Servius-Dan. on *Aeneid*, X, 179, following Cato's *Origines*.

the strong Ionic influence which pervaded the Etruscan cities in the sixth century. Notwithstanding their conflicts, the Phocaeans and Etruscans were bound by common interests and we find the citizens of Velia, with truly Hellenic lack of sentimentality, put from their minds the memory of the cruel fate which their captive kinsmen had suffered at the hands of the Caeretans and acted as intermediaries between the Etruscans and the Gulf of Tarentum.¹ It appears that some of the extremely lucrative trade across the instep of the boot passed through Velia, which was on good terms with Sybaris. A certain soothsayer called Callias the Elean (i.e., Callias of Velia) plays an important, if questionable, part in the life and death struggle between Sybaris and Croton (Herodotus V, 44-45). In 443 B.C., long years after the destruction of Sybaris in 510, there was at last a successful attempt to plant a colony which should inherit her old prosperity. This was Thurii, which stood not far from the older city and grew rich from the same sources.² Along with the rest of the Sybarite inheritance, Thurii acquired the friendship of Velia, which grew stronger with the decline of Laus. So the Thurians would be in contact with the descendants of those Phocaeans who had founded Velia about a century before.

Thurii was an international colony, in which Athens was one of the mother cities. When the Athenian contingent started in 443, Herodotus the historian went with them. Herodotus apparently worked on his history while he was living there, for Italian allusions are scattered through the text (I, 145; VI, 21; VI, 127) and tradition has it that he died and was buried in that place. We have evidence from his own statements that he was interested in collecting local tradition (V, 44 f.). With his lively curiosity and eagerness to gather information, it is credible that he elicited the story of the Phocaean adventures and their tales of the Etruscans from citizens of Velia, who would not be unusual visitors in the Thurian market place.

Let us look at the details of the Lydian legend with this possibility in mind. The form of the tale is such that it might be a piece of oral tradition which had modelled itself with repetition upon the experience of the narrators themselves. Half the population left and went west. Half the population of Phocaea had done that same improbable thing on their first departure from Asia Minor and history repeated itself for them, when, for the second time, they left in ships from Corsica and sailed for Magna Graecia. A similar tale exists about Teos, whose inhabitants fled before the Persians to found Abdera (Herodotus I, 168), and about the people of Colophon,³ who about a century earlier had fled from the Lydians to found Siris on the Gulf of Tarentum. So for Ionians the episode was natural enough. In fact, it would be almost the inevitable version for them of any migration from Asia to the west. But half the population of Lydia is another story from half the population of one city. An upheaval on such a scale would leave more traces in the chronicles of Asia Minor than this one has left. It is more probable that small bands of adventurers left without official organization and made their way to Italy by stages, in journeys such as we find magnified to heroic proportions in the myth of Aeneas. Such departures would cause no stir among the Lydians, who were prosperous and contented enough to stay at home. There is no reason why Xanthus or anybody else should record them. It seems possible that the Etruscans of Caere (for that is the city usually associated

¹ Ciacere, *op. cit.*, I, p. 303.

² Ciacere, *op. cit.*, II, pp. 358 ff.

³ Ciacere, *op. cit.*, I, p. 297.

with Phocaeen stories in Herodotus) had told the Phocaeans that their ancestors came from Lydia. If they said so, it was probably true, since popular imagination does not invent stories of immigration where none has taken place, but inclines toward a belief in autochthonous origin. As for the royal leader of their expedition, it need not occasion too much surprise if no trace of him is found in Lydia. He would not be the last to be ennobled by a descendant *ut primordia urbium augustiora faciat*. Far from discrediting the Lydian anecdote of Herodotus, the Phocaeen source does much to strengthen it as preserving some historical truth, for it would explain the origin of the incredible details which have overlaid the credible suggestion of an Asiatic origin for the Etruscans.

The time elapsed between the first important Phocaeen contacts with Etruria and the coming of Herodotus to southern Italy is more than a century. There is almost no limit to the possibilities of corruption in such a story transmitted orally through three or four generations, especially when the transmitters are those Phocaeans whose anecdotes of Arganthonius (Herodotus I, 163) prove that with them a tale lost nothing in the telling. The preposterous story of the famine and the games is a feature which might be explained by such corruption, particularly since in this case the oral transmission involves a shift of languages. We do not know the Etruscan word for the games which the Romans borrowed from them and called *ludi*, but it seems clear that the Greeks had no one term which includes the whole idea of *ludi*—the offering to the gods of an entertainment, which might consist of music and dance, of play or pantomime, of athletic exercises, of chariot races or of a combination of them all, and in which the idea of contest or competition was not an essential element. **Ἀθλον* or *ἄθλος* means in Homer a contest in war or sport or the prize of the contest, while *ἀγών* originally meant the assembly of people watching the games, and later the contest. The lack of equivalent terms is probably a reflection of a difference in the fundamental character of the institution among the two peoples. Whereas in Italy *ludi* are a familiar specific against plagues, prodigies, droughts, failure of crops, and adverse battles in time of war, I know of only one instance of such an application in Greece. This was when Thaletas of Gortyn was called to Sparta to organize dances to end a pestilence (Plutarch, *De Musica*, 42). Summoning a Cretan to manage the performance is itself an indication that the idea was not familiar to the Spartans themselves and the word used has the specific meaning of *choral dance*. *Ἑορτή*, the common word for a religious festival, is perhaps most nearly equivalent to *ludi* but to increase the possibilities of confusion this word has a Greek equivalent *παιγνιά* (Aristophanes, *Lys.* 700), which might give rise to serious misunderstandings. The ordinary meaning of *παιγνιά* is a game such as children play for amusement only. Some features of the *ludi* such as the ball dance, for instance, might either be pure diversion or, on occasion, be used as solemn religious offerings. It is not difficult to imagine that in the course of numerous repetitions the wrong sort of *παιγνιά* made its way into the story and the *ludus* to avert famine became the *παιγνιά* to distract the famine victim from his pangs.

Thus the conjecture of a Phocaeen intermediary between Herodotus and the foundation legend of Caere furnishes at least a plausible explanation of the incredible elements in a story based on an actual occurrence. These incredible elements are the

mass migration which Lydian tradition does not support, but which the Phocaeans might have supplied from their own history, and the fantastic story of the famine and the games, which shows the distortion almost inevitable in an oral tradition starting from a slightly inaccurate translation.

LOUISE ADAMS HOLLAND

PHILADELPHIA, PA.